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Energy and environment headlines for the morning of Monday, June 15, 2015



GAO raises concerns about contractor oversight at nuclear waste sites

By Kevin Rogers

The agency tasked with overseeing the nation's nuclear waste sites and stockpiles doesn't have defined procedures for using contractor information to conduct oversight, a government watchdog has found, noting those issues played a role in last year's radiation accident at a New Mexico waste storage project.

The [report](#) by the Government Accountability Office found that the Energy Department's National Nuclear Security Administration doesn't have a nationwide policy for the use and assessment of contractor assurance systems, or CAS, developed by contractors to track progress on meeting their requirements.

The agency had in 2011 developed a plan on how to use that information, but discontinued it after finding it ineffective, leaving field offices to develop their own oversight and management policies. Headquarters also abandoned a process to review those oversight approaches.

"Discontinuing this process without replacing it eliminated NNSA's internal

Freedom



control for ensuring the effectiveness and consistency of oversight approaches,” the report said.

The agency relies on the CAS to conduct oversight of management and operating contractors, but the lack of a consistent system on using that information has led to oversight issues. Five field offices developed their own strategies, while two did not.

“NNSA runs the risk of not using its oversight resources effectively, either by underutilizing information from CAS and missing opportunities for efficiency, or by overrelying on information from CAS and possibly missing contractor performance issues that put safety, security, or mission accomplishment at risk,” the report said.

The report pointed to incidents stretching back to 2000 where contractor oversight issues led to security and safety incidents at NNSA and DOE sites.

At the request of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the report also looked at last year’s Waste Isolation Pilot Plant problems, where there was an underground vehicle fire and an unrelated radiological release from a burst waste drum days later. The salt cavern repository is designed to hold military-grade nuclear waste.

The release of radiation had stemmed from improper packing by contractors at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Instead of packing the drum with of clay cat litter, used to absorb nuclear waste, the contractor used organic litter, which created a reaction that caused the drum to burst.

At an Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee hearing Friday, lawmakers on both sides of the debate grilled DOE and NNSA officials on the findings, including the high costs of the WIPP restoration effort. The site remains offline, and costs to get it operating by 2016 could exceed \$500 million.

“When these projects go off the rails, taxpayer dollars are at risk and so are important projects that national security depends on,” said House Energy and Commerce ranking member Rep. Frank Pallone, D-N.J.

Oversight and Investigations Chairman Rep. Tim Murphy, R-Pa., argued that the documented history of oversight issues at the agencies set the stage for the radiation incident at WIPP.

“Is it truly any surprise to you that Los Alamos feds did not know that workers spent a year and a half incorrectly mixing hundreds of barrels of radiological waste?” he asked NNSA Deputy Administrator Madelyn Creedon.

Creedon admitted that the failure stemmed from the CAS oversight system and vowed that the agencies were acting to mitigate the issues.

“Los Alamos did not have a mature CAS system and it had not picked up these

issues,” she said. “One of the primary weaknesses in the CAS system, as we’ve now gone back and looked at it, was it was inadequate with respect to overseeing sub-contractors.”

The GAO recommended that NNSA take five steps to improve the system: Establish consistent CAS use, develop field office procedures to assess CAS, reestablish its field office review system, review how CAS should be used to conduct oversight, and examine any potential staffing shortcomings.

NNSA agreed to the recommendations and pledged to commence work to implement them.



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Upcoming Events

US gasoline prices rise 3 cents to \$2.87 a gallon

By The Associated Press

CAMARILLO, Calif. (AP) — U.S. gasoline prices have risen again, but at a slower pace.

The average price of regular jumped 3 cents a gallon in the past two weeks to \$2.87 a gallon.

Analyst Trilby Lundberg says it's the smallest hike in nine weeks. The average is 82 cents a gallon lower than a year ago.

The highest price in the continental United States was \$3.62 in San Diego. The lowest was \$2.45 in Tucson, Arizona.

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Evacuations but no injuries after pipeline ruptures in Texas

By The Associated Press

CUERO, Texas (AP) — Authorities say no one is injured after a natural gas pipeline ruptured in rural South Texas, sparking a massive fire that prompted the evacuation of nearby homes.

DeWitt County Emergency Operations Center spokeswoman Peggy Fonseca says an Energy Transfer Partners pipeline ruptured near Lindenau around 8 p.m. Sunday.

Fonseca said early Monday that the gas had been rerouted and the fire is extinguished.

She says seven homes were evacuated but that no one is injured. Residents will be allowed to return home after safety inspections are completed.

Pope eyes worldwide audience for environment encyclical

By The Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis is looking for a global audience for his upcoming encyclical on the environment, saying Sunday it's meant for everyone, not just Catholics.

Francis engaged in some self-promotion during his weekly blessing, alerting the thousands of people in St. Peter's Square that his first solo encyclical is coming out on Thursday and inviting them to pay attention to environmental degradation around them.

"This encyclical is aimed at everyone: Let us pray that everyone can receive its message and grow in responsibility toward the common home that God has given us," he said.

The eagerly awaited document will be launched at a Vatican news conference Thursday that underscores Francis' insistence that it's not just for Catholics: The three speakers are a Vatican cardinal, a Greek Orthodox theologian and an atheist scientist.

US fast-track vote leaves Pacific trade pact talks in limbo

By Elaine Kurtenbach

TOKYO (AP) — How slow can you go? The effort to get U.S. trade legislation through Congress, clearing the way for progress on an Asia-Pacific trade accord, is in limbo once again.

The U.S. House of Representatives on Friday shot down a proposal to give President Barack Obama authority to negotiate global trade deals for congressional approval or rejection, without amendments.

Among U.S. trading partners, the setback was viewed more with resignation than panic.

Supporters of the trade pact say "fast track authority" is needed to give the U.S. and other participants a chance to help fashion rules for trade in the 21st century. Critics object to confidentiality requirements preventing disclosure of

details of the negotiations, viewing the overall agenda as too aligned with the interests of big business.

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Rancher denies firing gunshots near US researchers in Nevada

By Martin Griffith, The Associated Press

Nevada rancher and states' rights advocate Cliven Bundy said Saturday that contract researchers for the federal Bureau of Land Management had no business being on rangeland where he grazes cattle, but he denied he or his supporters fired gunshots near them.

Three employees of a nonprofit Nevada organization told authorities they were monitoring water sources in the Gold Butte area, about 100 miles northeast of Las Vegas, on June 5 when they were approached by two men who asked what they were doing.

The researchers quickly left after six shots were fired later that night near their camp in an area that's being considered for federal protection as a national conservation area. There were no injuries.

Las Vegas police are investigating the incident. Bureau of Land Management officials have declined comment beyond a statement saying the shooting prompted them to take unspecified safety precautions in the area to protect its employees and contractors.

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A message from the American Petroleum Institute

America is now the world's #1 natural gas producer and will soon be #1 in oil. Now more than ever, abundant energy means abundant prosperity, opportunity and security for all Americans.

[Learn more at EnergyTomorrow.org](http://EnergyTomorrow.org)

Saudi Arabia opens \$585B stock market to foreign investors

By Aya Batrawy

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Saudi Arabia's stock market, valued at \$585 billion, opened up to direct foreign investment for the first time Monday,

as the kingdom seeks an economic boost amid low global oil prices.

The opening of the Tadawul Saudi Stock Exchange allows companies, particularly those that are not in the oil business, to raise money straight from foreign investors, with the goal of expanding businesses, diversifying the economy and creating more jobs for the kingdom's growing population. Before Monday, foreigners only could access the market indirectly, through a local Saudi institution, which was costly and complicated.

The stock exchange's estimated value makes it the biggest in the Middle East. Petrochemical firms make up a fifth of Tadawul, with heavyweights like Saudi Basic Industries Corp. among those listed.

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Decades-old water rights in California halted amid drought

By Fenit Nirappil and Scott Smith

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Despite California's drought, Richard and Danna Jones' cattle grazing pasture has stayed green thanks to water flowing free from a gulch claimed by his grandfather in 1911.

Their nearly ironclad right to water was suspended Friday when state regulators ordered them to stop taking the water for their rural property east of Redding. They are among more than 100 senior water rights holders told for the first time in decades that major waterways in California's agriculture-rich Central Valley are too dry to meet demand, but aren't expected to be the last.

"The place is going to look like hell," said Danna Jones. She and her husband depend on money from letting cattle graze on their land to pay off property taxes. "It's going to dry up and become a star-thistle patch. It's not going to be good for us."

California's mandatory water curtailment has moved from cities, towns and farmers with less iron-clad water rights to those historically shielded from cuts. Thousands of people, water districts and entities with claims dating before 1914 have long enjoyed nearly guaranteed access to water, and some are threatening lawsuits to keep it this way as California's drought drags into a fourth year.

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Texas planners look to aquifers to prepare for next drought

By Betsy Blaney

LUBBOCK, Texas (AP) — The torrential storms of last month essentially ended one of Texas' worst-ever droughts, but much of the excess water has already flowed into the Gulf of Mexico or will evaporate by year's end.

With a wary eye toward the next prolonged dry-streak that inevitably will come, some think expanding the use of underground aquifers may help slake the thirst of Texas' rapidly growing population.

Three trillion gallons of water gushed from swollen Texas rivers into the Gulf of Mexico in May, and another 2 trillion gallons will likely evaporate from state reservoirs by year's end. Combined, the lost water would be enough to serve Texas' booming population for an entire year.

If widely implemented, aquifer storage and recovery would be among the major additions to the state's water infrastructure since scores of reservoirs were built following the historic drought of the 1950s.

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Putin, Erdogan discuss gas pipeline

By The Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The presidents of Russia and Turkey have met and discussed a proposal for a pipeline that would carry natural gas from Russia to Turkey.

Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan met Saturday in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, on the sidelines of the European games, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian news agencies.

Peskov gave no specifics of the talks, other than to say they were detailed.

The pipeline, called Turkish Stream, has been proposed by Russia after the abandonment of South Stream, a long-proposed project to carry Russian gas to southern Europe.

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Congress to look at EPA, Interior budgets and regulations

In Congress this week, a House panel marks up a budget measure cutting appropriations to the Environmental Protection Agency and the Interior Department, while Senate committees take testimony on EPA's ozone and coal ash regulations, The Hill reports.

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Shell's Arctic drilling plans take another step forward

The Environmental Protection Agency will allow Shell to discharge wastewater from its Polar Pioneer and Noble Discoverer Arctic Drilling rigs, FuelFix reports.

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FBI warns energy firms about growing cyberattack threats

The FBI says growing cybersecurity attacks pose a particular threat to energy companies, which should take steps to guard against them, The Associated Press reports.

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Small nuclear reactors getting positive feedback in Washington

Federal regulators and senior lawmakers in Congress have been making positive comments about the future role of small nuclear reactors in the country's energy policy, The Hill reports.

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IEA sees growth in renewables

The International Energy Agency predicts the use of renewable energy will continue to grow until it is the leading source of electricity generation by 2030, helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the International Business Times reports.

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Oil chiefs to attend Russian investor conference

Although Western bankers and other top business chiefs are staying away from the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum for a second year in a row, top officials from major oil companies like BP, Royal Dutch Shell and Total are planning to attend this week, Reuters reports.

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Oil down on stronger dollar, Yemen peace talks

Gains in the dollar, coupled with the start of peace talks to resolve the Yemen conflict, pushed oil prices lower early Monday. U.S. benchmark crude dropped 88 cents to \$59.08 a barrel in electronic trading on the Nymex, while in London Brent fell \$1.10 to \$62.77, Reuters reports.

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Hiccups holding back solar thermal plants

Giant solar facilities that use mirrors and steam to generate power – like BrightSource Energy's Ivanpah project operated by NRG Energy in Southern California -- have been falling far short of their projections for generating electricity, in part because of technical problems, The Wall Street Journal reports.

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US bishops eyeing climate encyclical with skepticism

U.S. bishops are taking a wait-and-see attitude on the climate change encyclical due to be announced by the pope Thursday, The New York Times reports.

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Fossil fuel divestment movement gathering momentum

The fossil fuel divestment movement, started just four years ago, has seen major success recently with Norway's sovereign wealth fund, AXA and the Rockefeller family announcing that they would sell off coal investments, The New York Times reports.

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Upcoming Events

- Jun. 15, Washington: Environmental groups to hold rally and press

conference to pressure the Smithsonian Institute to drop its ties to fossil fuel interests. 12:30 pm , Smithsonian Castle, 1000 Jeferson Dr. SW

- Jun. 15, Washington: The Energy Information Administration to host its 2015 EIA Energy Conference, featuring remarks from Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz and EIA Administrator Adam Sieminski. Conference runs through Tuesday. 8:45 am , Renaissance Washington.



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